



## ZEN AND THE ART OF RETAIL P.R.

### HOW TO PROMOTE YOUR STORE MORE EFFECTIVELY

## MICHAEL LEVINE INTERVIEW BY CASSIDY KERN

**MICHAEL LEVINE** is the founder of Levine Communications Office, one of the most prominent entertainment Public Relations firms in the country with affiliate offices in New York and London. His client list has included (among others) **MICHAEL JACKSON**, **BARBRA STREISAND**, **FLEETWOOD MAC** and numerous actors such as **MICHAEL J. FOX** and **DEMI MOORE**.

**What's the best attitude to have when approaching Public Relations?**

Perception is reality. How one comprehends given information is all-important in public relations. But I do not believe people are easily duped. You'll pull off [a successful campaign] only if the perception you seek to convey fits the reality of the public, the reality of the times.

**Then speaking in "the reality of the times," what are your feelings on Napster, publicity blessing or public relations nightmare?**

I think the Napster controversy has been both good and bad for the music industry. Whether it will be considered good or bad in the end will remain to be seen, but the real issue at this point is that it has clearly pointed out the power of the Internet revolution--and not just for music. Whichever side you come down on, this whole ordeal has certainly shaken the entertainment industry to its core.

**How can P.R. be utilized for music retail business owners?**

They must do everything they can think of to create unique selling propositions for their store; in other words, make it different. Far too often, I find the experiences in record stores to be too mundane. Don't view it only as a record store but as an entertainment meeting place or an information meeting place. I would encourage record dealers to expand their product line; create more of a cultural experience. Uniqueness, singularity and distinction; these words must be your mantra.

**How would incorporating product diversity be advantageous to in smaller markets?**

I want record stores to do to them-

selves what Starbucks did to coffee buying. Once upon a time there were places you would go to that you would pay a quarter and get a cup of coffee. Then a guy came along and created something called Starbucks, which is a more cultural experience. I want record stores to redefine themselves in a similar way. A customer should be able to buy books and magazines, maybe hear guest speakers, or interact with other customers of similar interests.

**But how do you get from that 25-cent cup of coffee to a global empire?**

Understand your customer. I think that the opportunities for creativity in the music business are unlimited.

**"You should constantly be brainstorming ideas and opportunities to showcase your organization."**

There's no law in the United States Constitution (that I'm aware of) that says, "Record stores can only sell records." These are self-imposed limitations and I think promotion is more and more important. We live in a world where credibility and visibility are interlinked. You should constantly be brainstorming ideas and opportunities to showcase your organization.

**Obviously businesses can't be staging and orchestrating events everyday. What are some ways to keep your company visible without the public getting tired of hearing about you?**

Some people may find this crass, but being a Good Samaritan is good for business. Those individuals and companies that do charity work go a long in cementing a positive image within their surrounding community.

## **"...business is inextricably linked with the well-being of the community."**

I'm talking about sponsoring a fundraiser for VHI's Save the Music, or organizing an annual "music diversity" forum or it could even be as simple as picking up litter. I believe business is inextricably linked with the well-being of the community, and as a matter of simple justice, it is incumbent upon us to help make this a better world, whether we receive much publicity for our efforts or not. At the same time, I have no problem with making sure the rest of the world knows about it.

**On your website you mention a marketing technique you developed called "The Tiffany Theory." What are its basic components how can it be applied to the music industry?**

The Tiffany theory relates to everything; music, politicians, movie and television stars and even how you sell toilet paper. Simply put: public relations is like gift-wrapping. If you give someone a present, and you give it to them in a Tiffany box, it's likely that they'll believe that the gift has higher perceived value than if you gave it to them in no box or a box of less prestige. This is not because the receiver of the gift is a fool; but instead, they're more likely to buy into the idea because we live in a culture in which we gift-wrap everything.

**Sometimes getting the media to notice your company can sometimes feel daunting or even futile. Are there any sure-fire ways to get your company mentioned?**

No matter how we perceive the world, news is--and will always be--what somebody else says it is. So tailor your message to whichever

medium you're trying to get coverage from. Tailor to the audience, tailor to the outlet and tailor to the location. This starts with "The Pitch." The way you pitch your project can have more bearing on your long-term success or failure with the media than the project's merit itself. Remember that to score with newspaper reporters and editors, you have to comprehend their requirements. First, news value is central to their thinking. They aren't interested in hype. Fluff is fine, but hype isn't.

TV is power; if you get yourself on the tube, power passes to your hands, and success in your efforts is almost guaranteed. To be a part of the show, you have to know how TV works. Be current on the station's format.

It's important to remember that you must be thoroughly knowledgeable about your subject—be it your store or music in general—when you engage the media. Because once you go toe-to-toe with them, we're talking about performance. Remember, too, that the media get bored easily and—much like a two-year-old child—have a short attention span. You have to keep flashing new toys to get them to keep their eyes on you. Your ability to keep them focused means the difference between being seen on the front page or being shown the front door.

**How do you deal with bad publicity?**

I don't know which is worse, too little good publicity or too much bad publicity. The former is no doubt frustrating, but the latter can be devastating. When faced with a crisis, e.g., the media are all over your tail for alleged misconduct, impriety, or misstatement, your first duty is to respond immediately. Do not delay in dealing with the problem. How you handle the bad news

will play a large role in how your good news will be met by the media in the future.

One of the single most important points to keep in mind when facing a negative situation of your own is to follow the old dictum: the best defense is a good offense. You must never go on the defensive. By anticipating negative questions you can stand ready to counter with positives.

**"...public relations is like gift-wrapping."**

**And if the press doesn't print or skews that information, what is your defense—or rather, offense?**

You're learning, (laughs). If a newspaper gets something wrong, you can request a retraction or a correction (though publications don't always comply.) The same is sometimes true of television. If a retraction does run, then you've gotten two mentions for the price of one.

**"You must never go on the defensive."**

But by in large, you'll have to let this sort of thing go. You just have to take your lumps and look on the bright side. After all, you did get some media coverage, and that means your message got through on some level. Generally, I feel it's better to get skewed press than none at all. The longer you play this game, the thicker your skin will become, believe me.

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